

Last week I crossed the Platte River south of Columbus and overlooked a river of sand. You could walk from bank to bank without getting your feet wet. From areas surrounding Norfolk and Oakland in northeast Nebraska to Lincoln and Nebraska City in the southeast, the landscape vividly displayed the devastating effects of this summer's drought. Brown and shriveled corn plants withered in their rows. Several fields had already been chopped for silage for livestock feed. One elderly farmer told me he had seen things this bad only one other time in his life. While the town hall meetings I held this month centered mostly on America's fiscal situation, Nebraskans know very well how important a vibrant agricultural sector is to our nation's well-being.

The numbers tell the story of the seriousness of this drought - not only across our state but also across the nation. More than 60 percent of land in the lower 48 states is in some stage of drought. In Nebraska, nearly 25 percent of the state is in what is considered "exceptional drought," the most severe classification under the U.S. Drought Monitor. Almost all of the rest of the state falls into the "extreme drought" category. The relentless heat, with consecutive strings of 100 degree days in July, broke records throughout the state. The impacts of the extreme heat and lack of rain are now becoming clear: like other farm states across the Midwest, Nebraska crop yield estimates are down dramatically – 14 percent lower for corn and 30 percent lower for soybeans.

Some options for emergency relief have become available to ag producers. All counties in Nebraska were made eligible for grazing and haying on Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres. Natural disaster designations, which allow farmers to apply for emergency loan assistance, are also available in counties across the state. To learn more about these resources and others at the state and federal level, please visit the state website, <http://www.droughtcentral.nebraska.gov/>

In the town hall meeting discussions, I was asked about the Farm Bill and its prospects of passage this year. The bill, which sets agricultural policy for the nation and is typically reformed and reauthorized every five years, is set to expire September 30. It directs policies and administers programs relating to crop management, conservation, energy, and nutrition assistance. In fact, 80 percent of the bill's spending is now directed to nutrition programs. It also helps farmers plan for ways to mitigate risk during natural disasters, such as this year's drought.

Congress needs to pass a new Farm Bill. In June, the Senate approved its version of the Farm

Bill on a vote of 64–35. The House Agriculture Committee, on which I serve, approved its version of the legislation on July 12. I voted for the measure, which was approved on a bipartisan vote of 35-11. But the Farm Bill has not yet been scheduled for a vote before the entire House of Representatives.

While the proposal passed by the House Ag Committee is not perfect, it provides adequate stabilization policies for farmers and ranchers, supports young and beginning farmers and ranchers, and embraces new market opportunities domestically and internationally while still reducing spending. The proposal charts a new way forward for America's farmers and ranchers while respecting the federal government's severe budgetary constraints with program reductions.

Not many Americans fully understand the importance of agriculture to our country. However, this year's incredible drought conditions, combined with wildfires, are helping increase awareness of where our nation's food supply comes from. It is important that all Americans understand that agriculture's benefits to our nation go far beyond food security; it stabilizes and strengthens our economy, increases our energy independence, and builds new opportunities in rural America.

The effects of the drought of 2012 are potentially far-reaching and much deeper than we now know. In a bipartisan and collaborative fashion, Congress should move quickly to meet its obligation and pass new farm legislation. Time is running short. When Congress reconvenes, I am hopeful the House of Representatives as a whole will act on this important policy on behalf of farmers, rural America, and all Americans who benefit from the reliability and affordability of our nation's food supply.